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# Social networks, language and identity negotiations among queer migrants in Scotland

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## ABSTRACT

In this article, we explore queer migrants' social networks and the role language plays in how they negotiate companionship, romance and sex within queer community and diasporic environments. We draw on interviews with 56 self-identified LGBT migrants from Central and Eastern Europe and the Former Soviet Union living in Scotland, UK. In doing so, we bring into conversation and critically engage with perspectives from queer migration literature and from work on migrants' social networks and language use. In the article, we show how language underpins access to English-speaking and ethnic social circles, and how it is powerfully bound up with emotions, affect and perceptions of social proximity or distance. We argue for the need to move beyond abstract notions of queer or diasporic communities, and for an exploration of queer migrants' sociality grounded in their personal communities, social networks and the language(s) used within them. We argue that this approach can better capture queer migrants' complex identity negotiations and diverse sources of support and belonging, without assuming the primacy of either sexuality or ethnicity.

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Queer migration; lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender migrants; language and migration; social networks; East European migrants

## Introduction

The role of social networks in the process of migration and settlement has long been a central theme in migration studies. Social networks offer access to different types of support, including emotional, informational and instrumental, and are sources of socialising and companionship (Ryan et al. 2008). Moreover, language proficiency informs how migrants access and develop social networks in the 'host' country with both long-settled populations and diasporic communities (Temple 2010; Ryan 2011).

Nonetheless, both queer migrants' social networks and the relationship between language and social networks remain underexplored in existing queer migration literature. On the one hand, the exploration of social networks is mostly limited to LGBT 'scene' or community spaces, such as online dating (Boston 2016; Dhoest 2018) and transnational activism (Binnie and Klesse 2013). Yet participation in these spaces has been shown to

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be uneven, and affected by ethnicity, class, gender, age, able-bodiedness and family responsibilities (Wilkinson et al. 2012); thus, the predominant focus on queer migrants' interactions in queer community spaces brackets their 'diverse sources of support and belonging' beyond queer networks (Wilkinson et al. 2012, 1165). Furthermore, queer migration literature tends to explore language and social networks in isolation, with research on language generally focussing on how queer migrants' 'native' language(s) may reflect culturally specific constructs of sexuality and gender (Malanansan 2003). Despite claims that both diasporic and LGBT community spaces can be difficult to negotiate for LGBT migrants as sexualised or racialised outsiders, little attention has been paid to the role that language plays in shaping queer migrants' social networks, and in their ability to interact in diasporic and LGBT spaces (but see Murray 2016).

The article explores the language/social network nexus in the experiences of queer migrants in Scotland, drawing on research with LGBT migrants from Central Eastern Europe (CEE) and the Former Soviet Union (FSU) living in Scotland. Increased freedom of movement in the post-socialist region since the demise of state socialism alongside recent rounds of EU enlargement has resulted in significant 'East-West migration' within Europe over the past 15 years (Favell 2008). The UK, and Scotland within it, quickly became a very popular destination country for migrants from the region, not least because the UK, unlike most other EU states, did not impose restrictions on their ability to access the labour market.

We frame our discussion of queer migrants' dis/engagements with queer and diasporic spaces within the broader context of their 'personal communities', a concept that encompasses meaningful personal ties in which people are embedded, and through which they 'give and receive companionship, intimacy and support – whether this is with family members or friends, or other significant ties' (Pahl and Spencer 2010, i; Wilkinson et al. 2012). We foreground the importance of language in shaping queer migrants' personal communities and broader social networks. We investigate language as a tool through which bi- or multilingual migrants negotiate companionship, romance and sex within diasporic and English-speaking environments. We consider different aspects of language that emerge from our participants' accounts: as a means of communication associated with different degrees of cultural and emotional closeness; a proxy for nationality and ethnicity that can be read as a marker of racialised identity; and a marker of self-identity and ethnocultural belonging. In light of this, we explore how language shapes LGBT migrants' negotiations of sexual and couple relations, and of LGBT spaces in Scotland; finally, we consider migrants' interactions within their own diasporic community.

## Language and migrants' social networks

Sociolinguistic perspectives emphasise that, far from being merely a means of communication, language is also 'a socio-political construct that carries with it particular values' (Butcher 2008, 373), and as such it is deeply implicated in social hierarchies of power (Lippi-Green 2012). The politics of language features prominently in public debates on migration and 'integration', which posit migrants as lacking sufficient language skills and hold up proficiency in the official language(s) of the 'host' society 'as symbol of the successfully assimilated migrant' (Lippi-Green 2012, 249): for instance, for migrants

wishing to naturalise, proving one's knowledge of the national language(s) is often a key hurdle in the process of acquiring citizenship (Fortier 2018). On the other hand, migrants' competences across different languages, including their ability to function and communicate in the language(s) of the 'host' society, is rarely recognised: indeed, in countries with a single official language like the UK, ideas of integration premised on monolingual ideology devalue linguistic diversity (Milani 2008). However, migrants are usually bi- or multilingual, routinely using two or more languages in their everyday lives, although they may have asymmetrical levels of proficiency in them (Pavlenko 2005).

Speaking a different language or speaking with a foreign accent also marks migrants as racialised outsiders. This can expose them to language discrimination, such as 'no foreign language' rule at work (Roberts, Davies, and Jupp 1992). Language-based discrimination often reinforces other forms of racialised exclusion based on phenotypical characteristics (Davis and Moore 2014). However, it can also affect the lives of white migrants, whose putative whiteness does not exempt them from forms of racialised exclusion (Miles 1982; Fox, Moroşanu, and Szilassy 2012). Research on East European migrants in the UK shows that visible and audible markers of difference, including speaking migrants' native languages or accented English in public, puts them in an ambiguous position as 'white and European insiders [and] cultural outsiders' (Rzepnikowska 2019, 64), and can expose them to discrimination, verbal abuse and violence (Dawney 2008).

Language is also a way to situate oneself in the social world, and thus it is deeply intertwined with issues of identity (Lippi-Green 2012). Migrants often harbour a strong attachment towards their first language(s), which is bound up with their cultural heritage. Therefore, acquiring a new language or switching between two or more languages involves 'translating the self' (Besemeres and Wierzbicka 2007), a process that can be uncomfortable and emotional. Research on multilingualism also shows that many migrants perceive their first language(s) as the more intimate 'language of the heart', while 'perceived language emotionality decreases with increased age acquisition and is low for languages learned in formal contexts' (Pavlenko 2005, 172–173). Strategic choice of language can be key to navigating different social spaces, and this may involve compartmentalising the use of different languages as well as language 'crossing' and 'switching'. However, language can also be used as a symbolic resource to demarcate ethnic 'difference and belonging, at times defining new social spaces, as well as defying points of authority within dominant fields of power' (Butcher 2008, 371). Importantly, language is not linked to identity in a straightforward way, as migrants often display 'hybrid' identities and complex attachments to both country of origin and destination, and are influenced by the languages and cultures of both (Temple 2010; Pavlenko 2005).

Language plays a key role in migrants' ability to access different social networks and to interact in different environments, as work on migration from CEE to the UK shows. Spencer, Anderson, and Rogaly (2007) have shown that CEE migrants in low-wage occupations tend to spend their leisure time with other migrants either from their country of origin or from other countries, but rarely socialise with British people. However, migrants with better English skills report more extensive social contact with 'locals' and perceive a lower level of social distance from them. The ability to speak English is important but not sufficient to ensure greater contact with settled populations, as cultural barriers and experiences of racism and discrimination may deter migrants from seeking

contact (Temple 2010; Ryan et al. 2008). Co-ethnic networks can be an important source of emotional support and protection from discrimination, but over-relying on them can negatively affect migrants' social capital, cutting them off from information about the 'host' society and hindering social mobility (Gill and Bialski 2011; Ryan 2011).

Recent work on CEE migrants' social networks has mainly given consideration to English language proficiency as a factor influencing opportunities for social mobility (Ryan 2011). However, migrants' language use and their investment in 'native' and 'host' languages is not just motivated by instrumental needs, but also by wider concerns about identity, relationships and imagined futures (Pavlenko 2005; Temple 2010).

### Queer migrants' negotiations of diasporic and LGBT spaces

Recent research shows that attitudes towards homosexuality among CEE migrants are more socially conservative compared to those prevalent in 'host' Western European societies (Röder and Lubbers 2015; Mole et al. 2017). These attitudes reflect dominant narratives about family, sexual and gender norms in migrants' countries of origin, narratives that, according to opinion polls, find favour with large sections of the public (Piekut and Valentine 2016). Diasporic spaces may also uphold conservative sexual and gender norms associated with an imagined homeland, as attachment to ethnonational traditions becomes an important source of identity (Fortier 2001). The link between diasporic spaces and national traditions is explored in Siara's work on UK-based Polish language internet fora (Siara 2009, 2012). Siara shows that online discussions policed the boundaries of acceptable sexuality for Polish migrant women: interactions in diasporic online spaces shored up normative notions of sexual double standards and traditional gender roles, and reinforced their heteronormative character by discussing almost exclusively heterosexual relations. However, Siara (2009, 2012) shows that dissenting views challenging sexism and homophobia were also voiced, suggesting that Polish migrants' views on gender and sexuality cannot be reduced to a single narrative of tradition and social conservatism.

Other work has highlighted that diasporic spaces are often experienced or perceived as homophobic by queer migrants. In a study on queer Russian-speaking migrants in Berlin, Mole (2018) shows that 'mainstream' Russian diasporic spaces were widely perceived to be aligned with 'traditional' Russian culture and unwelcoming of non-heterosexualities. Similarly, work on queer asylum seekers has shown that they often remain closeted in diasporic spaces, perceived as socially conservative or overtly homophobic (Karimi 2018).

Some scholars, however, have argued that assumptions about heightened homophobia in diasporic communities should be scrutinised, with a critical eye to how discourses of homophobia are circulated within and across racialised diasporic communities (Vidal-Ortiz 2008). Indeed, despite widespread claims that migrant communities are more conservative and homophobic than the Western 'host' societies, queer migration literature has rarely explored in any depth how queer migrants negotiate diasporic spaces, or how they develop social networks. In his work on gay Mexican migrants in Los Angeles, Cantú notes that their everyday lives are 'in most ways tied more closely to the larger Latino community than to the larger gay one' (Cantú 2009, 123). This important point is echoed by Luibhéid, who questions ethnocentric narratives of queer migration as a journey from 'repression' to 'liberation', highlighting how 'migrants experience "restructured" inequalities and

opportunities through migration' (Luibhéid 2008, 170). However, as noted earlier, the exploration of queer migrants' social networks has thus far been quite narrowly focussed on their interactions within queer networks and community spaces, and has paid little attention to other sources of support and belonging.

Queer migration literature has highlighted how LGBT community spaces may be uncomfortable to negotiate for queer migrants. Dating and sexual encounters are important moments where racial hierarchies and racist prejudice come to the fore in queer communities, and shape queer migrants' experiences of sexual and romantic relationships (Callander, Holt, and Newman 2012; Ruez 2017). Men looking for sexual partners routinely express preference for certain racial groups on these websites; racialised partner discrimination can manifest itself in the fetishisation of physical and psycho-social features ascribed to certain racial groups, as well as in subtle or explicit forms of marginalisation of non-white men. Boston's (2016) work on 'libidinal cosmopolitanism' looks at Polish gay migrants' attitudes towards interracial intimacy in the UK. Interracial intimacy was often seen as a benefit of migration, since Poland is much less racially diverse than the UK. Polish migrants may racialise non-white men positively (by fetishising them as desirable partners, based on sexualised racial characteristics) or negatively (by marginalising or rejecting them as undesirable partners) (Boston 2016). However, existing literature largely overlooks the question of how white East European migrants may be placed within the racial hierarchies that inform LGBT spaces (Callander, Holt, and Newman 2012). Moreover, limited language and cultural capital may restrict queer migrants' ability to engage in the cosmopolitan online sexual cultures described by Boston (2016) and Dhoest (2018).

Work on language in a queer migration context has largely focussed on how queer migrants invoke 'scripts, language and cultural idioms of homosociality and same-sex eroticism from the homeland' (Afzal 2016, 69). This work has shown how queer migrants may use language to (re)negotiate sexual, gender and ethnic identities, but again with a firm focus on interactions within queer or queer/ethnic, rather than wider social networks. Malanansan (2003) shows that Filipino gay men in New York experience a dissonance with the mainstream 'gay America' they encounter. This is expressed through using the word *bakla*, rather than gay or transgender, to describe themselves: the Filipino term *bakla* conflates effeminacy, transvestitism and homosexuality, and marks Filipino men as different from the mainstream hypermasculine US gay man. Vernacular language and ethnic traditions can also be reclaimed to articulate queer diasporic identities: among queer South Asians in the US, deconstructing South Asian tradition is used both 'to oppose homonormativity in the LGBT mainstream and heterosexist politics within the co-ethnic community' (Adur and Purkayastha 2017, 1). The creation of queer diasporic spaces, including organisations, clubs and internet fora, is well documented in the literature (Kuntsman 2003; Cantú 2009). This can be a response to experiences of racialisation and homonormativity as well as the expression of a desire to connect with other queers sharing a similar ethnocultural and linguistic heritage.

## Methodology

The article draws on data collected via in-depth interviews for two related projects: the ESRC-funded *Intimate Migrations* project (thereafter: IM, 2015–2017), and a pilot

project (thereafter: Pilot, 2013). Both projects aimed to explore the role played by sexuality and gender identity in LGBT migrants' experiences of migration and settlement. In the IM study, we conducted biographical interviews with 50 self-identified LGBT migrants to explore reasons for migrating and experiences of migration and settlement in Scotland. Towards the end of the interview, we asked participants to draw a map of the people closest to them (sociogram); this was used as a prompt to explore migrants' personal communities (Pahl and Spencer 2010). Interviews collected for the pilot study (9 participants, three of whom were re-interviewed for the main study) covered similar ground, except that participants were not asked to draw a sociogram.

Across the two studies, over half of our research participants (36) were Polish, which reflects broader demographic trends in recent migration from CEE and the FSU to Scotland and the UK. The sample also included smaller numbers of migrants from Belarus, Bulgaria, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Slovakia, Romania, Russia and Ukraine. The vast majority of our participants moved to Scotland as economic migrants. Most of them (53) were from countries that had joined the EU in recent enlargements: under the principle of the free movement of labour within the EU, they were largely exempt from immigration control and restrictions on their right to work. Although they benefited from a racialised preference for white European workers, a long-standing feature of UK immigration policies that pre-dates the EU (Favell 2008), they were not exempt from forms of racialised exclusion (Fox, Moroşanu, and Szilassy 2012; Rzepnikowska 2019).

While the majority of our participants were educated to undergraduate degree level or above, this was not always reflected in their occupation and income. Although our sample included professionals and skilled workers, many participants worked below their qualifications, and a large number were employed in low-paid jobs in the service and hospitality sectors. This reflects broader patterns of employment among East European migrants in the UK, as migration from the region was driven domestically by a demand for cheap labour to be channelled into low-paid, precarious work (Anderson and Ruhs 2010; Dickey, Drinkwater, and Shubin 2018).

Our participants ranged in age from 19 to 49, and most moved to Scotland/the UK in their 20s and 30s. Most of them had at least some knowledge of English prior to migrating, and the vast majority were fluent in English at the time of the interview. This reflected both their high educational attainments and the fact that the vast majority had lived in Scotland for several years, and had improved their English through everyday use or education. Nonetheless, individual participants had differing degrees of fluency in English: some functioned equally well in English and in their native language(s); some had asymmetrical levels of fluency, and felt more comfortable speaking their native language(s); and a few felt very constrained and uncomfortable when speaking English. To different extents, they all lived bilingual or multilingual lives, as they used different languages to interact in different social environments. For some of our participants, this involved switching between multiple languages, because of their multilingual family backgrounds or complex migration histories. For example, we had a few participants from the Baltic States, Belarus and Ukraine who had grown up with one or more Russian-speaking parents, and were fluent in Russian as well as in the national language of their country of origin (e.g. Latvian or Ukrainian). Upon moving to Scotland, they were able to interact in spaces defined by the majority language of the country where they grew up, as well as in Russian-speaking social networks and spaces, which



encompassed a broad range of nationalities and ethnicities because of Russian's status as a *lingua franca* across the former Soviet Union.

All pilot study interviews were conducted in English, while interviews for the main study were conducted in Polish (31), Russian (5) and English (14). We advertised the project in a range of CEE and FSU languages and offered to interview participants in language we spoke ourselves (Polish, Russian or English), or in other languages through an interpreter, although none of our participants requested one. The language in which the interview was conducted is noted for all interview quotes.

## Language and belonging

For most of our participants, language – as a means of communicating with long-settled populations – was the most challenging issue in the initial period of settlement in Scotland. This impacted on their ability to communicate in everyday situations, confidence in social interactions and patterns of socialising. English was commonly experienced as a barrier to everyday communication and elicited feelings of inadequacy and 'otherness'. The difficulties of communicating in English were compounded by the complexities of language use within Scotland, in particular different Scottish accents, local slangs and the use of Scots or Gaelic words. Language barriers were gradually overcome as accents and colloquial expressions became familiar through daily exposure and made their way into migrants' own linguistic repertoires. However, language was also bound up with broader aspects of intercultural communication such as culturally specific meanings, humour, small talk and courtesy phrases.

Although for many participants negotiating language and cultural barriers became easier with time, they remained important factors in establishing convivial relations with long-settled populations in Scotland, and were especially significant in establishing meaningful relationships that went beyond routine interactions or occasional socialising. This was reflected in our participants' sociograms, where they were asked to portray the people that were closest or most important to them. By and large, British people featured much less prominently than co-nationals or other migrants; the reasons for this perceived social distance was largely explained as a matter of cultural and linguistic barriers. Many of our participants found establishing meaningful social relations with other migrants through the shared medium of English easier because communication relied less on shared cultural meanings and language subtleties than with long-settled populations, a finding that echoes Spencer, Anderson, and Rogaly (2007).

Language could mark migrants from CEE and FSU as racialised outsiders. For example, speaking a language other than English was sometimes read as a proxy for ethnicity or nationality, and prompted hostile reactions:

I felt discriminated against at work. And, well, I feel it every single day. It's the guests [*hotel clients*]. Once there was a situation, for example. I wasn't involved, but another Polish person was ... and a Slovak guy [...]. They were at the reception desk and spoke Polish. A client showed up and didn't like it ... and he complained to the manager of the hotel. How come the hotel staff don't speak English! The thing is - they didn't speak to him - they spoke between themselves. (Ola, Polish, 30–34, IM; interviewed in Polish)



The episode related by Ola was echoed in other migrants' experiences of being subjected to 'go-home' rhetoric for speaking a language other than English in public spaces (e.g. on public transport). Even when interacting in English, accent or other aspects of migrants' speech could be read as a marker of racialised difference: as Lippi-Green (2012, 251) notes, when migrants 'become bilingual the question is no longer which language, but which English'. Language difference – speaking in a foreign language or accented English, limited understanding of English, grammar mistakes – was commonly read as a proxy for 'foreignness'.

Language could be both a means of 'othering' migrants and a way to build bridges and make connections: indeed, some participants recalled instances in which 'locals' had made a deliberate effort to overcome language barriers or had offered help with negotiating difficult interactions in English (e.g. telephone conversations or GP appointments). However, as Rzepnikowska (2018, 853) argues, in exploring how convivial relations between migrant and long-settled populations develop, it is important to keep in mind that these interactions 'are embedded in social practice which is not free from racism and tensions'. Although not new, these tensions were arguably very palpable in the UK in run-up and aftermath of the 2016 EU referendum, which coincided with the end of fieldwork for our main study. At the time, migration became a highly politicised topic in political and media discourse, which often normalised nativist and anti-migration sentiments, problematising the presence of both EU and non-EU migrants, as well as of settled ethnic minorities (Rzepnikowska 2019; Virdee and McGeever 2018).

For many migrants, language use was also intimately intertwined with their sense of self. As Megi put it:

[W]hen I think what it means to me - to be Polish - in fact that means that I speak Polish. The language is my identity in that matter. (Megi, Polish, 40–44, IM; interviewed in Polish)

The key role of language as an ethnic marker, and its centrality in developing social networks and close personal relationships in Scotland, was especially salient for Polish participants, because the presence of a sizeable Polish population created more opportunities for socialising in Polish-speaking environments. Language, however, also played a role in how non-Polish participants negotiated social relations, although for them finding a common language did not necessarily mean speaking the same 'native' language.

Socialising mainly with co-nationals or other migrants, rather than in English-speaking environments, was not always a conscious choice, but also a matter of convenience, ease, and linguistic and cultural closeness. Patryk (Polish, 35–39, IM), who did not speak English when he moved to Scotland to join his Polish partner, explained the prevalence of Poles in his personal community and wider social networks as the result of his limited English and of the significant presence of other Poles in the town where he lived, where Poles outnumbered other nationalities even in the English language classes that he attended. Lukas got on well with his Scottish work mates but rarely socialised with them in his limited free time, partly because his Slovakian partner spoke little English. He and his partner mainly socialised with another Polish gay couple or with visitors from Slovakia and the Czech Republic, relying on the closeness and mutual intelligibility across different Slavic languages:

We have a couple of friends, another Polish couple we know, and we visit them sometimes. We get regular visits from back home or from Czech Republic. [...]. Yes, at the moment I would say it's more like keeping in touch with people like we are! Because of the language barrier as well. Sometimes it's easier to speak in Slovak or Polish language than in English. Especially when you are socialising. (Lukas, Slovakian, 30–34, Pilot; interviewed in English)

Lukas saw language as a barrier to socialising in English but also as a reason to socialise with 'people like we are', with a similar language and cultural background. Here and elsewhere, language and cultural closeness were discursively used to draw symbolic boundaries between an imagined 'us' and 'them'. These boundaries, however, were not always drawn around a shared nationality (i.e. Polish): they could be drawn around more expansive understandings of ethnicity (East European) or around a shared experience of 'migrantness'. Kosta, who moved to Scotland as a working student, talked about seeking out, upon arrival, the very few fellow Bulgarian students at his university, one of whom became his closest friend. In the absence of a sizable Bulgarian population, his social network at university mainly consisted of other international, rather than British students. Although he interacted with both groups in English, he found it difficult to grasp cultural and linguistic nuances in interactions with 'locals':

In the student halls, when we would gather in the evenings, I wouldn't always understand what they were talking about or joking about ... because I, you know, I didn't know the bands that they were talking about, or I didn't know about the TV shows, or the celebrities, or these kind of things, that it's all common to them, but I had no experience of it, I had no idea what they were talking about. (Kosta, Bulgarian, 25–29, IM; interviewed in English)

### Language, intimate relations and queer spaces

Language played an important role in our participants' negotiations of romantic and sexual relations. Many spoke of their 'native' language(s) as the one(s) that felt more intimate to them, and more adept at conveying feelings and emotions which sometimes got lost in translation. Despite being highly articulate in English, Vita contrasted the immediacy of communicating with her Lithuanian friends with the difficulties she experienced when trying to convey affection to her Scottish girlfriend:

I now have two good Lithuanian friends here in [*name of Scottish city*]. Of course, it is pleasant [*to socialise with Lithuanians*], it is a bit nostalgic [*smiles*]. Sometimes it is heavenly. For instance, a few days ago I was trying to explain to my [*Scottish*] girlfriend how we in Lithuania use diminutives. For example, there is an affectionate version of my name. Every Lithuanian [*first*] name has another affectionate version of it. [...] In Russian, for instance, the name Aleksandr is shortened to Sasha. It was difficult to explain this to her. They don't have this, Scottish names have a short version but it is not really used in the same way. They have other additional words, like 'baby', 'baby girl' [*in English*]. We laughed, and she said, 'My little foreigner' [*in English*] [*smiles*]. (Vita, Lithuanian, 25–29, IM; interviewed in Russian)

Languages possess different affective resources that are culturally specific (Pavlenko 2005): here, the use of diminutive first names as terms of endearment does not translate well into English and loses its immediacy because it needs to be explained. Paradoxically, it was easier for Vita to explain this to the interviewer, because of the similarities between Lithuanian and Russian (Vita's first languages, both learned in childhood), than to her

girlfriend. Because of its association with emotions and culture (Pavlenko 2005), language was an important factor in negotiating romantic relationships for some of our participants:

I befriend nice people ... and it doesn't matter whether they're Polish or Scottish or whatever ... When it comes to a relationship with a boyfriend ... I think I don't see myself in a relationship with a British person ... It's a deeper kind of relationship, and this mentality – I think it could bother me ... And apart from that, I speak fairly good and sometimes very good English now ... but I also don't see myself in a relationship with a person that doesn't speak the same first language, right? (Przemek, Polish, 35–39, IM; interviewed in Polish)

Przemek deliberately looked for a long-term partner from the same linguistic and ethnocultural background, because he believed that it would be easier to find common ground and communicate at a deeper level. Sharing the same ethnocultural background was a key criterion in a potential partner only of a handful of our participants. Many of them, however, were in a relationship with a co-national, while few had a British or Scottish partner. Although this partly reflected the high incidence of participants who migrated to Scotland with a partner, it may also be indicative of the significance of language and cultural barriers in couple relations. Language barriers also featured in the negotiation of more casual relations. For example, Krzysztof recounted his experiences of meeting men for sex online:

I guess it's also easier to get to know a sexual partner when you share a common language. If you're not Scottish, if you're not a Brit, if you're not good or fluent in English, people don't feel like making the effort to get to know you. [...] When I meet sexual partners – just to have sex ... They're usually migrants from other countries rather than British people. When British people hear that you've got a different accent, they just ignore you. So, I'm much more likely to go out with a Brazilian ... I've recently gone out with a half-Chilean half-Spanish ... and an Italian guy ... these kinds of people rather than Scottish people. Scots are too lazy – that's my opinion – they can't be bothered. They don't feel like making an effort to understand you [...]. And when you meet a migrant – an Italian or a Spaniard or a Chilean man, English is also a foreign language for him ... and he understands this ... and tries to understand you. (Krzysztof, Polish, 45–49, IM; interviewed in Polish).

Krzysztof felt 'othered' in encounters with British or Scottish partners, who in his experience made little effort to understand him and get to know him, or ignored him altogether as an undesirable lover. His accented English was negatively racialised by British partners as evidence of his 'foreignness', but did not put off other migrants; sexual encounters with them were more comfortable for Krzysztof because of their willingness to bridge the communicative gap. Boston (2016) shows that Polish migrants in the UK may racialise potential non-white partners both positively, by fetishising them as highly desirable partners, or negatively, by rejecting them as undesirable partners. However, Krzysztof's experience suggests that white East European migrants may, in turn, be racialised in LGBT spaces on the basis of ethnonational characteristics, adding another dimension to the ethnic hierarchies within LGBT communities described in current research (Callander, Holt, and Newman 2012; Ruez 2017).

Krzysztof also talked about the inadequacy of his language and intercultural skills as barriers to effective communication with British or Scottish partners. Communication, however, is a collaborative act, and actors' motivations (e.g. hostility, fascination,

solidarity) may be just as important as language fluency and intercultural competence in determining the outcome of communicative acts (Lippi-Green 2012). In Krzysztof's online interactions, communication breakdown seemed to happen not because of his accented English, but because of British or Scottish men's negative evaluation of his accent, and their refusal to share the communicative burden with him.

Krzysztof's experience was markedly different from Agnieszka's account of meeting her Scottish partner in her local pub, which she regularly visited to improve her English and make new friends:

[T]he people in [*name of pub*] were always very friendly to me. When I was going [*in with*] the pram with my baby [*from a previous relationship*] they always give me five [*high-fived her*] and talking to me and try, so I met a few friends there and I, still I wanted to practice my English. [...] And I remember she [*the woman who became her partner*] came and she was just watching me and that, and she came and, and she said something English, as in Scottish, very Scottish, and I couldn't understand ... [*pause*] And next time, few days later, she came and she said in Polish, 'your eyes - beautiful' [*laughs*], in Polish. (Agnieszka, Polish, 35–39, IM; interviewed in English)

Agnieszka implicitly referred to the language barriers that she encountered in her local pub. However, she did not feel marginalised because of her accented English, and mostly talked about how communicative gaps were successfully filled through non-verbal language (high-fiving) and the basic Polish her suitor learned to break the ice.

Language and cultural differences are also featured in participants' experiences of LGBT commercial and community spaces. Maria, who had moved to Scotland in her teens with her family and grew up with Polish as her dominant language, described her first-ever visit to a gay club, and how her accented English shaped this and subsequent visits to the club:

[T]he first time when I was in [*a gay club in*] Edinburgh my English wasn't so well, so it was quite hard, so I was only limited to what I could say and what I could understand, so I kind of kept to myself. But I did flirt with people, and people flirted with me, and, you know, we had a little dance or a little snog, it never went further till a year later, when I felt more comfortable with obviously talking and speaking to people. (Maria, Polish, 35–39, Pilot; interviewed in English)

For Maria, negotiating sexual relations in a way that felt safe and comfortable depended on her ability to communicate freely in English. Participants' migrant background mattered in negotiating the English-speaking LGBT scene in Scotland. Roman found attending the local meetup for gay men awkward because of language and cultural barriers, and eventually stopped going:

There are meetings of local gays in one of the pubs [...] They meet up every Wednesday just to come together and chat. And sometimes foreigners come in too. [...] But it's very rarely, unfortunately. I attended these meetings for a year and then I thought that it was a waste of my time. Because they usually talk about rather insignificant things ... And besides, they talk in a way that is very difficult to understand. (Roman, Ukrainian, 35–39, IM; interviewed in Polish)

It is significant that some of our participants sought out or created queer spaces within diasporic communities where they felt comfortable articulating both their queer and migrant self. For example, Piotr and his partner Tomek initiated a meetup group for Polish gay men:

We came across this [*Polish gay*] couple [...] and the four of us thought it would be great to meet people like us, right? Migrants and gay ... people from Poland. Because being able to use the same language makes you closer. You say a joke – a line that comes from a [*Polish*] film and everybody knows why we're laughing. You don't need to spend hours explaining why the joke is funny. (Piotr, Polish, 40–44, IM; interviewed in Polish)

The group was advertised through a Polish language Scotland-based website and used to meet regularly in a gay-friendly pub. This resonates with other research showing that queer migrants may inhabit and 'domesticate' mainstream queer spaces by regularly visiting them with co-ethnics (Afzal 2016, 69).

## Negotiating queer and migrant belonging in diasporic communities

Initiatives such as the meetup group for Polish gay men need to be understood within a broader context where mainstream LGBT spaces may not always feel comfortable for queer migrants. However, Piotr and Tomek's experience also highlights potential tensions between ethnic and sexual identities in diasporic spaces. When their meetup group was advertised through a Polish language Scotland-based website, it triggered a spate of hostile reactions:

Soon there was an ocean of hatred below this post. We – the older and experienced gay men – realised we knew so little about us [*gay people*], you know. [...] The ideas heterosexual people may have about gay men ... We wouldn't even know such things were doable ... Things like ... – *50 Shades of Grey* is a fairy tale in comparison. (Piotr, Polish, 40–44, IM; interviewed in Polish)

Here, the outpour of homophobic comments on the Polish language website disrupted the affinity based on a shared linguistic and cultural background. Other participants mentioned similar incidents on social media specific to certain migrant communities, where interactions marked 'ethnic' online spaces as heterosexual and heteronormative; in some cases, they also normalised homophobic views, around which consensus seemed to coalesce. Everyday homophobia at the hands of co-nationals was not confined to online community spaces, but was also experienced or witnessed in face-to-face interactions; this was particularly significant for Polish migrants because of the presence of a sizable Polish community. Several interviewees mentioned episodes of casual verbal abuse, although a few had encountered more serious forms of marginalisation (e.g. malicious gossip, being asked to leave a flat-share). However, our findings point to a more complex picture than that of migrants facing heightened homophobia within their own diasporic community (e.g. Mole et al. 2017), and gravitating towards English-speaking queer social networks as a way to distance themselves from networks 'marked by ethnicity and/or place of origin' (Viteri 2016, 122). Here, we explore negotiations of queer and ethnic belonging in diasporic communities by focussing specifically on Polish migrants.

The personal communities of most of our Polish participants featured prominently other Polish migrants of any sexual orientation or gender identity. When Polish participants disassociated themselves with the abstract notion of the 'Polish community', because it was experienced or perceived as socially conservative, homophobic or otherwise problematic, they still tended to name other Polish migrants among their closest relations in Scotland. It is also worth noting that disassociation from Polish diasporic

networks was not uniquely linked to homophobia, but sometimes explained by referring to the fractious, gossipy or claustrophobic nature of these networks (Temple 2010). Finally, homophobia was not uniformly experienced as a problem specific to 'ethnic' communities (Stella, Gawlewicz, and Flynn 2016).

Below, we discuss the personal communities and wider social networks of three Polish participants, Piotr and his partner Tomek's and Agnieszka's, all of whom experienced homophobia within Polish networks. We pay attention to how their personal communities and networks developed over time and to their relations within the Polish diasporic community. We argue, however, that their social networks were not uniquely defined by either ethnicity or sexuality, and that language can be a useful lens to unpack the complex dynamics involved in their identity negotiations.

Piotr and Tomek moved to Scotland as a couple and had lived in the same Scottish city for nine years. Their migration was facilitated by Polish heterosexual acquaintances, who provided accommodation and helped with practicalities upon resettlement. They were both university-educated and had good jobs in the voluntary sector in Poland; upon moving to Scotland, Tomek continued to work in the voluntary sector, but with Polish clients, while Piotr worked in a supermarket bakery, mainly with Scots. Piotr, who spoke some English to start with, became fluent in English through his daily interactions at work; Tomek, however, after nine years in Scotland, could only handle simple communicative situations in English and relied on Piotr to negotiate more complex social interactions. Piotr and Tomek mainly socialised with and relied on the support of other Poles, and continued to do so beyond the initial stage of settlement because Tomek's very basic English made it awkward for him to interact in English-speaking networks. Like in Poland, Piotr and Tomek's friendship circles largely overlapped: they shared friends and acquaintances, rather than cultivating separate networks.

Agnieszka had lived in Scotland for 10 years; she migrated on her own with little English and without knowing anyone. A qualified social worker from a working-class family, she initially worked as a care assistant; as a single mum, her main goal was to earn money to support herself and her infant child, whom she had left in Poland in the care of her mother. Within less than a year, her mother and child joined her, and eventually all her immediate family (stepdad and siblings) moved to Scotland. Agnieszka was determined to improve her English to sort out the practicalities that would enable her to be reunited with her child, and to get a better job in the social care sector. Upon moving to Scotland Agnieszka felt 'very isolated, very lonely, because of the language barrier'; however, she did not seek out the company of other Polish migrants. Instead, she socialised with mainly British colleagues and tried to meet new people by regularly visiting her local pub, located in a working-class urban area. Here, she eventually met her partner of nine years, a Scottish woman. Although Agnieszka's investment in improving her English may be partly motivated by consideration around social mobility (Ryan 2011), it also represented an emotional investment in friendship and relationships with English-speakers.

Thus, while starting from a similar level of English, Piotr and Tomek's social circle was oriented from the start towards the Polish diasporic community, and Agnieszka's towards English speakers. Their orientation towards Polish- or English-speaking environments in Scotland also affected the way in which they dealt with homophobia within Polish diasporic networks.



In the initial stages of settlement, Piotr and Tomek set up a meetup for Polish gay men with another Polish gay couple. The network it generated provided practical support and information ‘when everyone was new to this place’ (Tomek), but also mitigated against homophobic prejudice among other Polish migrants. Tomek and Piotr could not afford to rent a flat on their own, and only felt comfortable sharing with other Poles because of their limited English; however, they had difficulties finding Polish flatmates, and suspected that many refusals were motivated by prejudice. Although none of the responses were offensive or openly discriminatory, ‘[m]any conversations or emails about sharing accommodation with [*Polish*] people would end when we disclosed that we were a same-sex couple’ (Tomek). The hostile reactions to Piotr and Tomek’s message advertising the meetup prompted some distancing from the Polish diasporic community. Their friendship network in Scotland was initially strongly oriented towards LGBT Poles – particularly gay men they encountered through the meetup, but also other LGBT Poles migrating to Scotland, to whom they offered accommodation and support in the initial stages of settlement. However, Piotr and Tomek also noted that not all the homophobic incidents they experienced in Scotland were perpetrated by other Polish migrants – indeed, the most serious one, an assault, was perpetrated by Scots. Moreover, when Tomek was subjected to homophobic blackmailing by a work colleague, the majority of his all-Polish collective sided with him. Eventually, their personal communities and social networks came to include heterosexual Polish migrants who did not have a problem with their sexuality; they believed that younger Polish migrants were more open and that, over the years, the attitudes of older migrants had changed as they had ‘soaked Scotland in’ (Piotr). Although the majority of their friends and acquaintances were Polish speakers, their social circle had also grown to include English-speakers (both British and migrants with whom English was the shared language); however, in their social gatherings the conversation switched continually between Polish and English, something their non-Polish-speaking friends had to be prepared for.

Agnieszka also experienced homophobia in Polish diasporic settings, including her workplace, where her role involved supporting Polish clients who often used homophobic abuse or made casual homophobic remarks. She felt unable to confront their views, except in very generic terms, because this would involve coming out to them, something she was loathe to do, as it would risk disrupting the rapport she had built with them and crossing professional boundaries. Her sexuality partly motivated her desire to socialise and make friends in English-speaking environments, and her parallel disengagement from other Polish migrants:

I had hard [time] with Polish people here [...] I didn’t connected very, like I say I had [...] Scottish friends, I felt so free and natural and I could just be myself. With Polish people, probably that’s my sexuality, I was so careful who I’m talking to [...]. I don’t have really Polish friends, not at all, because I don’t want them to get to my family, upset and make any stress, which is not very necessary, you know, I don’t need that. (Agnieszka, Polish, 35–39, IM; interviewed in English)

Agnieszka’s friends in Scotland were mostly Scottish, because she felt a connection with them but also because she wanted to protect both herself and her family from prejudice and malicious gossip within Polish networks. Agnieszka’s quote illustrates powerfully



how, for queer migrants, 'being oneself' is not just linked to ethnic identity, but also to sexuality. As Pavlenko (2005, 214) argues, for bi- or multilingual migrants, 'feelings about their languages, identities, and futures play an important role in their linguistic choices'. She shows that identity-related emotions can lead bi- or multilingual migrants to embrace or distance themselves from their first language(s); equally, they can 'prompt them to fashion alternative or additional identities' in languages learned later in life (Pavlenko 2005). In the latter case, a second language can become 'another language of the self' (Pavlenko 2005, 233) through a process of affective socialisation. Agnieszka's motivations for learning English are linked to her sexuality and to the intimate relations forged with her partner, child and friends. While her grammar and accented English may reveal her foreign origins, Agnieszka had developed a Scottish twang and was very expressive and 'at home' in English. For other queer migrants, however, including Tomek and Piotr, their native language remained 'the language of the heart', and therefore central to their identity and personal communities.

In Tomek and Piotr's case, the centrality of Polish to their social networks can be seen as an example of ethnic boundary-making; their sexuality, however, also plays a major role in how their personal communities developed. In Agnieszka's case, her orientation towards English-speaking environments is partially motivated by a desire to distance herself from potentially homophobic Polish networks. However, it would be simplistic to read this orientation as simply a desire to assimilate. Indeed, Agnieszka remained very engaged with Polish diasporic networks in Scotland, both through her work and her family of origin, to whom she was close. In Agnieszka's case, language use marks and compartmentalises the social networks and environments where she feels comfortable being 'out' and the ones where she prefers to remain closeted. Thus, language can be understood as part of a broader 'time-space strategy' (Valentine 1993) to negotiate sexual identity across different environments.

## Conclusions

Our findings demonstrate that language plays a key role in how East European queer migrants develop personal communities and social networks in Scotland. In the article, we have illustrated how language underpins their access to English-speaking and ethnic social circles, and orients the ways in which they develop social networks and personal communities. We have unpacked how language can be at once a means of (inter)cultural communication, a marker of ethnocultural self-identity and a marker of racialised identity. Indeed, for our research participants language was powerfully bound up with emotions, affect and perceptions of social proximity or distance. This is key to understand how they negotiated romantic and sexual relations, as well as interactions in mainstream queer spaces in Scotland. It is clear that East European migrants are placed within the racial and ethnic hierarchies that inform LGBT spaces (Callander, Holt, and Newman 2012), and that limited language and cultural capital may constrain their ability to engage in queer social networks.

Drawing specifically on the experiences Polish migrants, we have also presented novel empirical insights into how queer migrants negotiate diasporic networks. What emerges is a discrepancy between generalisations about 'the Polish diasporic community', often perceived as socially conservative or homophobic, and the prominence of fellow Polish

migrants of any sexual orientation in participants' personal communities and social networks. We argue that examining queer migrants' social networks instead of abstract notions of 'Polish diaspora' can better account for their complex identity negotiations across sexuality and ethnicity. We show that sexuality is an important factor shaping the development of queer migrants' social networks even when they remain primarily oriented towards Polish speakers, and that different languages can be used to compartmentalise social networks where queer migrants are out and those where they prefer to remain closeted.

In suggesting new ways to explore queer migrants' sociality, we make an original and distinctive conceptual contribution to both queer migration literature and work on migrants' social networks. We argue for an exploration of queer migrants' sociality that goes beyond abstracted notions of queer or diasporic community, and that is grounded in the exploration of personal communities, social networks and the language(s) used within them. We show that this approach can better capture queer migrants' diverse sources of support and belonging, without assuming the primacy of either sexuality or ethnicity. In positing migrants as bi- or multilingual with asymmetrical levels of fluency and affective socialisation in the languages they speak, we partly disentangle language from ethnicity, showing that languages are not merely barriers to integration or markers of ethnic identity, but also communicative tools that migrants routinely use to negotiate the porous boundaries of social networks and environments. Ultimately, we argue that a sensitivity to language can provide a more nuanced understanding of how queer migrants negotiate both their ethnic and sexual identities within their social networks, and productively highlight the role played by emotion and affect in these negotiations.

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## Data availability statement

The data that support the findings will be available in UK Data Archive at DOI: 10.5255/UKDA-SN-853389, following a 5-year embargo from the date of archiving (29 January 2019). The embargo is motivated by ethical considerations.

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